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Cat Tips

Never Pet Your Cat in This Spot — They Hate It!

Study shows where you should never pet your cat because they despise it. Researchers were surprised by the results that were quite different than their expectations, based on how cats stroke each other. Don't pet your precious kitty again till you read this.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Researchers in the U.K. published results of a study on how cats prefer to be petted, and by whom
- The researchers approached the study assuming cats want humans to touch them similarly to the way friendly cats touch each other
- Cat friends tend to focus their attention on areas of the body that contain scent glands — the lips, chin and cheek; between the eyes and ears; and around the base of the tail
- The research team observed in two different experiments that kitties do not enjoy being stroked in the tail area by humans, and recommend pet owners focus instead on stroking their cat around the face and head

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published February 26, 2016.

If you're owned by a cat or interact with cats, you know that making nice with the feline species can be a special challenge. Some **kitties are outgoing attention seekers**, while others are standoffish.

And then there are those cats who beg to be held and cuddled, only to change their mind (vehemently) within seconds.

Needless to say, petting a cat, especially one you don't know very well, can be extra tricky because the handling one kitty enjoys can bring out the claws in another.

A team of researchers at the University of Lincoln in the U.K. set out to try to unravel the mystery of feline petting preferences.[1]

Do Our Cats Expect Us to Act Like Friendly Cats?

It's generally assumed animals prefer human touch that is similar to the touch of members of their own species. For example, feline friends tend to lick each other — an activity known as allo-grooming — so it's possible cats would really prefer their humans to lick rather than pet them! (Not advisable!)

Cat friends also tend to lick one another in spots rich with scent glands, including around the lips, chin and cheek; between the eyes and ears; and around the base of the tail. When cats rub against one another in these areas, they are swapping scents, with the result that they wind up smelling similar.

Also, cat experts recommend swapping scents between two strange felines before introducing them. (This can be accomplished by gently wiping one cat's head with a clean cloth and then gently stroking the other cat's head with the same cloth).

Given the above, it would seem to make sense that the face, head and base of the tail would be where cats would prefer their humans pet them.

There might also be an order in which cats prefer to be stroked. For example, kitty friends tend to start interactions by rubbing their heads against one another. Interestingly, when they allo-groom, there doesn't seem to be a particular order they follow.

Cats Being Cats, Less Than Half Gave Their Full Cooperation in the First Experiment!

The University of Lincoln researchers decided to look at two aspects of cat petting: how kitties respond to being stroked by a familiar vs. an unfamiliar person, and which parts of the body are prime petting spots.

To do this, they decided to observe and videotape 34 cats aged six months to one year in their own homes. The kitties were given time to adjust to the presence of the researcher and the video recorder before the experiment started.

Each cat was evaluated on two different days. On one of the days, the owner stroked the cat, and on the other day, the researcher did the petting.

The team tested not only the three scent gland areas, but also five additional areas: top of the head, back of the neck, top of the back, middle of the back, and chest and throat.

The order in which the cats' various body parts were petted was deliberately random. Stroking was done with two fingers for 15 seconds at each location.

The cats were free to walk away at any point during the petting sessions, and several did. Of the 34 kitties observed, only 16 allowed themselves to be stroked in all eight areas by both their owner and a researcher.

Study Results Show Cats Don't Appreciate Being Petted in the Tail Area

At the conclusion of the experiment, the research team analyzed the videos. First they looked for the number of times the cats responded positively with slow blinks, licking the person or rubbing their head against them, grooming, kneading and holding their tail up.

Next the researchers counted the number of times the cats displayed negative behavior, including swishing/flicking the tail, moving their head away from the person, licking their lips, biting, or taking a swipe at the person with their paw.

The results of the experiment showed that the cats displayed more negative behaviors when stroked by the tail.

Interestingly, they also seemed to prefer being petted by the experimenter rather than their owner. The researchers offered a few theories to explain this surprising result:

- The experimenters were simply new and novel, and therefore more interesting to the cats
- The owners' two-fingered stroke was not what the cats were used to or expecting
- The cats were accustomed to initiating interactions with their owners instead of the other way around
- Some of the cats may have been wary of their owners for unknown reasons

Second Group of Cats Validates Findings from First Group

The researchers then performed a second experiment with another group of 20 cats. Owners stroked their cat in a prescribed order, either from the top of the head and down the back to the tail, or the reverse. They used their normal method of petting rather than a prescribed (two-finger) method.

During this experiment, only 3 of the 20 cats walked away, however, the researchers observed that these cats also did not enjoy being stroked near the base of the tail, regardless of when in the petting sequence it occurred.

Heads, Not Tails!

The U.K. researchers concluded that cat guardians should avoid petting their feline companion near the tail, focusing instead on the face, especially the areas where the scent glands are located. Interestingly, the results of an earlier, smaller study of nine cats reached the same conclusion.[2]

It's not clear why some cat guardians stroke their pets near the tail. It could be it simply feels natural to run one's hand from kitty's head down the back to the tail. It could also be because many cats seem to arch their back or hind quarters when the area around the base of the tail is touched, which seems to indicate enjoyment … but which, based on these study findings, may actually signal the opposite!

Sources and References

The Washington Post June 30, 2015

[1] Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Volume 173, December 2015, Pages 60-67

[2] Anthrozoos: A multidisciplinary journal of the interactions of people and animals, Volume 15, Issue 3, 2002